

An Argument with Medicine and a Search for Manuscripts

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Introduction

The subject of my current research is the intellectual world of physicians in India in the period 1550–1750. This is the period just before British colonialism became well established, and is the last period in which Sanskrit scholarship flourished independently of British educational and cultural models. At this time, Sanskrit was still the principle medium of exchange amongst scholars outside the Islamic courts. Contrary to common claims, it was also a time of lively and voluminous scholarly activity: thousands of new treatises were composed in this period, on a range of subjects including philosophy, linguistics, astronomy, astrology, theology, liturgy, mathematics, law, and medicine. Ideas were not static and debates amongst thinkers in some disciplines began to display signs of impatience with ancient tradition, and a willingness to consider newness and innovation as intellectual virtues.¹

The *Debate on Illness and Health*

One short polemical tract on medicine that survives from this period

is the *Rogārogavāda* or *Debate on Illness and Health*.² This little treatise gives logical consideration to the principal concepts of pathology in classical Indian medicine ... and overthrows them completely. The author, Vireśvara, tells us that he composed his work in 1669, and that he was a resident of the ancient provincial town perhaps identifiable with Kāyatha, near modern Udaipur in Rajasthan.³ He was brahmin and the pupil of a teacher called Vihārīlāla Miśra, who came from Agra. Vireśvara is not shy about his talents: he tells us that his teacher was surrounded by the very cream of brahmin students, but that of all of them he was the top. And his work, he claims, will cause the professors of all sciences to fall silent: he has produced a new and amazing wonder.

For all his bluster, Vireśvara has indeed produced an unusual and interesting work. He systematically takes the principal theories of pathology in classical medicine, and refutes them one by one. Thus, he deals with humoral imbalance, diseases caused by bad *karma*, accidents, secondary diseases, hereditary diseases, birth defects, contagion, and corruptions of the humours and the body tissues. For example, Vireśvara points

¹For more on these topics, see Pollock (2001, 2000) and Wujastyk (2003, in press).

²Brief information is given by Meulenbeld (1999–2002: 328, 490).

³Wujastyk (in press) discusses the problems surrounding the author's place of origin.

out a fatal contradiction in the classical theory of humoral disease as follows. The greatest authorities define disease as identical to an inequality in the humours. And yet, in other places they say that the humours may naturally exist in different quantities, without causing illness, such as when phlegm naturally predominates at the start of the day, or after a meal. This is not to say that one is always ill after a meal. And so the central doctrine that humoral inequality is identical with disease must be wrong.

Having used similar artful arguments to refute each of the categories of disease causation in turn, Vireśvara then presents his own theory of general pathology, which is that diseases come and go for no apparent reason, just like the rising and setting of the stars, or the turning of a needle of a compass. Disease, he says, is any pain of the mind, body, or sense organs, and it arises for no reason. It is essentially random.

In short, Vireśvara attempts to mount a serious challenge to the foundational doctrines of classical medicine. His challenge may appear quixotic, but it is nevertheless offered in a spirit of intellectual rigour and debate which speaks of an original if impulsive mind. We don't know Vireśvara's age at the time he composed his work, but the fact that he speaks of himself as first amongst the students of his teacher suggests that he may have been a young man. Indeed, he may have been an angry young man, since he is not content merely to refute the doctrines of his elders; he repeated calls their opinions "the babbling of lunatics."

The style and argumentation of the *Debate on Illness and Health* strike the reader as irascible and intemper-

ate; it may even be that the work was a prank, although carried through with conviction. But "Intellectual life is first of all disagreement" (Collins 1998: 1) and Vireśvara, disagreeing with almost every basic tenet of classical medicine, certainly offered an intellectual contribution to the history of medical thought in seventeenth century India.

Towards an Edition

Vireśvara's work has never previously been printed or translated. The above information was based on reading a photocopy of a manuscript of the work which is in the renowned Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune. The staff of the Institute were exceptionally helpful in making the copy available to me, when I visited in late 2002. The transaction was concluded in a few hours, just on the eve of my departure from India. I read and transcribed the manuscript on the flight home, and arrived in the UK with a working copy on the basis of which I was able to begin discussing the work, and with which began work on a critical edition. During 2003, I read the work with a class of volunteer Sanskritists who met fortnightly at the Wellcome Centre.⁴

To my present knowledge, there are only four manuscripts of his work extant in the world today, although a few more may come to light in time. In order to complete a critical edition, I needed to examine the other three. Two are in the Sarasvatī Bhavan Library in Varanasi, and one is in the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute Library in Alwar, Rajasthan, not far from Delhi.⁵ During 2003 I wrote numerous letters to the Alwar and Varanasi libraries asking for copies,

⁴I should like to thank Ravi Kunzru, Dagmar Benner, Chris Gibbons, Mira Mehta, Isabelle Onians, Micaela Soar, and Radha Mehta for their input at these meetings.

⁵The Munich manuscript (Jolly 1912: 395) is an apograph of the Pune one.

but received no answers. A student of mine visited the Varanasi library on my behalf but met with no cooperation. However, the outlook was not wholly bleak.

Several years ago, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi sent a microfilm team to the Varanasi library, and filmed many of their manuscripts for preservation.⁶ By chance, during a period as a consultant at the IGNCA in 1997, I had been able to acquire a printout of their database of the medical and alchemical manuscripts they had filmed. On consulting this half-forgotten list, I discovered that my two precious manuscripts had been filmed, and were in Delhi. And Alwar is only a few hours drive from Delhi. It began to seem possible that with a bit of planning I would be able to get the manuscript evidence that I needed. In March 2004, therefore, I flew to Delhi, a printout of my nascent edition in one hand, and a digital camera in the other.

In Delhi

The IGNCA has always been strict about respecting copyright law, and the rights for their microfilms reside with the source institutions. I knew that they would not give me copies or printouts of the manuscripts. For a week, therefore, I perched on a swivel stool in front of a dusty microfilm reader in the old IGNCA buildings, and cheerfully collated the two microfilmed Varanasi manuscripts with my printout. In a small booklet, I wrote down every word of the Varanasi manuscripts that differed from the Pune one. The staff

of the IGNCA – many of them friends from my 1997 residency there – were unfailingly friendly and helpful, and I was sustained by the strong, sweet tea in the staff canteen which cost 2.5p per cup.

Once the Delhi collations were complete, I turned my attention to the last remaining manuscript.

Alwar

Alwar is a small city about three hours drive south west from New Delhi. Although it is not far from the metropolis, it is in Rajasthan, so it was a pleasant and familiar surprise to see many camels in the streets, and men wearing colourful turbans.

The manuscript I was hunting, the last of the four, was housed in the Alwar branch of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute (RORI). This organisation, headquartered in Jodhpur, has branches in many towns and cities across the state, each with a library of manuscripts donated by local families. RORI has a good record of publishing catalogues of its collections, but is less good at answering letters of enquiry. Normally one has to start at Jodhpur, and negotiate a letter of permission to use manuscripts at the outlying branches. In this case, I was covered by a permission letter granting study and copying rights to the members of the larger Chicago-based project to which my study is contributing.⁷ It took some time to locate the library, whose address is simply “Mahal Chowkh”, or “Palace Square”, but the search was repaid by the discovery of a grand and charming old palace (see Fig. 1).

⁶The IGNCA has also filmed over 1000 of the Sanskrit manuscripts from the Wellcome Library, which can now be consulted in Delhi.

⁷The “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism” project website is <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/sanskrit/>.



Figure 1: The Alwar Manuscript Library in the Mahal.

The Mahal was once the Maharaja's administrative headquarters for Alwar, and now houses municipal offices of various kinds, as well as the small rooms of the RORI manuscript library. This library houses the former royal collection of about 2500 manuscripts, catalogued by Peter Peterson in 1892, as well as about 6000 further manuscripts donated or collected subsequently. Most of the collection was catalogued in RORI volume in 1985.⁸

The librarian arrived at as the day was reaching its hottest, and his assistant in charge of manuscripts came not long afterwards. They had received my letters, and had expected me to appear. After some hours of discussion and negotiation, including phone calls to Jodhpur from elsewhere in the Mahal (the library had no phone), the manuscript was produced, and I began collation. There was no chance of completing the work in the time available, so I was

relieved to receive, a little while later, permission to photograph the manuscript. This was accomplished briskly, using a small but excellent digital camera (see Fig. 2).⁹

After filming my *Debate on Illness and Health*, and some manuscripts requested by other members of my research group, I transferred the images from the camera to my laptop computer, and burned a CD of them on the spot. The CD was donated to the RORI librarians, who were pleased with the offering. A colleague who visited the library a few years ago had told me that this would be an appropriate procedure, and it was indeed good to be able to give something back to the library. Although it may be some years before there is a computer at this RORI branch, the staff are well aware of the virtues of digitization for manuscript preservation and access in the long run.

⁸Biswas and Prajapati (1998: # 460, v. 21). Staff at the library are not able to find MSS using the Peterson reference numbers. Only the 1985 catalogue is used, and regrettably some former royal manuscripts described in the Peterson catalogue can no longer be located.

⁹A Nikon Coolpix 4300.

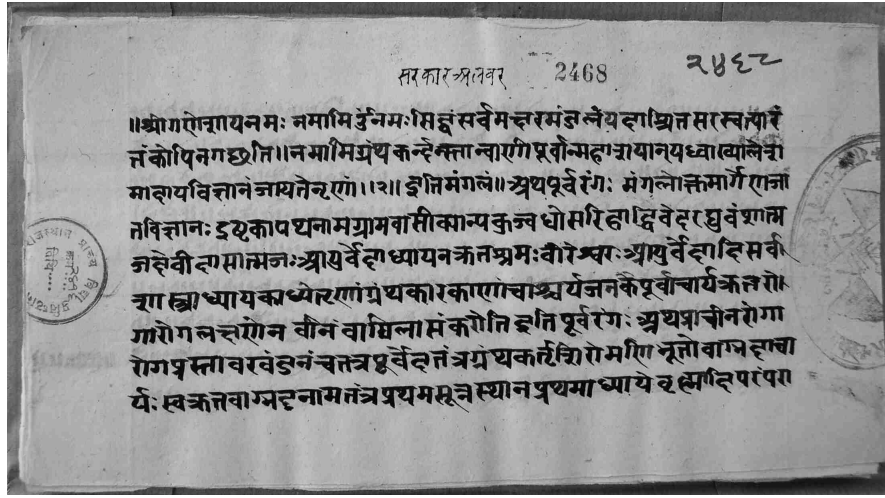


Figure 2: *Debate on Illness and Health*. Alwar MS 2416 fol. 1v.

NAMAMI

Back in Delhi, with my manuscript evidence complete, I took some time to acquaint myself with a recent Indian Government initiative which has offices in the monumental new IGNCA building. The National Manuscripts Mission (NAMAMI) was launched a year ago by the Prime Minister, and has a mandate to find, catalogue, preserve and publicize all Indian manuscripts. This is a colossal task, since estimates of the number of surviving manuscripts in public and private libraries in India range from a conservative 7 million to a bold 30 million. Some claim there are even more. NAMAMI (a Sanskrit pun: it means means “I bow with respect”) is a serious and well-conceived project, whose Director, Dr Sudha Gopalakrishnan, is working closely with the directors of over 20 selected manuscript libraries from across India to create centres of excellence in cataloguing, palaeography and conservation and to spread good practice through education and publicity. NAMAMI has a

charming and informative website¹⁰ and has already issued some beautifully illustrated publications and a first annual report. While I was visiting, two dozen manuscript librarians from across India were meeting in workshops to be trained in the use of a new manuscript cataloguing package designed by NAMAMI and programmed by the National Informatics Centre.

Now that I have got my research materials, I can push forward towards publishing a critical edition and translation of the *Debate on Illness and Health*. And in the meantime, I feel optimistic that as the work of the National Manuscript Mission matures, the prospects for gaining access to Indian manuscripts in future will improve substantially.

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¹⁰See <http://www.namami.nic.in/>.

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